

Treasuring Christ Above All Else

The Gospel of Mark: Mighty and Mild / Mark 14:1-11 / June 30, 2024

Introduction:

What things do you deem as valuable in your life? We all make value judgments in life and the way we live reflects them. For some, it is family, and our schedules are set to maximize family time and vacations. For others, it might be sports or hobbies and we spend our time and money in ways that reveal our love for it. For others, it is our careers. The value judgments we make determine how much or hard we work, how we use our finances, spend our time, and even who our friends are. Think for a moment on what you place value on and how your life is adjusted around them. In our passage today, in Mark 14:1-11, Mark draws out some value judgments to launch us into the final section of his gospel. A section that focuses on the betrayal, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus. Everything Mark has been writing to this point has been designed to set our minds on what takes place in chapters 14-16. We have seen Jesus Christ presented as mighty, consistently exercising authority over the natural and spiritual realms, while also predicting His pending death and setting His face towards Jerusalem where He said it would take place. In this final section of Mark's gospel, the mildness of our Savior is put on display as we see Him betrayed by one of His own disciples, ridiculed, mocked, beaten, and crucified on a Roman cross. Over the next two months, Mark will slow down the narrative and detail each moment in ways that should grip our hearts with the reality of what took place 2000 years ago. If you wonder at all about who Jesus is and why His death is so important, I encourage you to dig deep into what Mark relays in these chapters. Our text launches us into these themes by contrasting the value judgment an unnamed woman with the disciples and religious leaders of Israel. I want you to see how Mark focuses in on this contrast through his sandwiching technique. Look at verses 1-2, "It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him, for they said, 'Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people.'" Mark shifts the narrating by speaking of prominent dates on the Jewish calendar, "the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread." These are annual dates that commemorate God's redemption of Israel from Egypt and their flight into the wilderness. During the final plague of the Exodus, God sent the Angel of Death to kill all the first born in Egypt but told the people of Israel to mark their doorposts with the blood of a lamb so the angel would pass over their houses and their children would be saved. Following that, God said Israel would make unleavened bread to be ready to leave Egypt in haste. The Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread were celebrated every year to thank God for His miraculous deliverance from Egypt's bondage. Mark says it was two days before this celebration and "the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest [Jesus] by stealth and kill him." Now, pay attention to that description. They were secretly plotting to arrest and kill Jesus. Notice how Mark draws out their desire to secretly arrest Jesus after the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread so it wouldn't cause a public spectacle. Yet, we will discover God had other plans. Look now at verses 10-11, "Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him." In verses 10-11, the scribes plan is back in view with one of Jesus' disciples going to them in secret to betray Him. The scribes were glad to hear Judas' desire to betray Jesus because Judas would know Jesus' movements and allow them to arrest Jesus covertly, avoiding the public display. They then promise to give Judas money and Judas seeks an opportunity to betray Jesus. So, in verses 1-2 the scribes desire in secret is mentioned, in verses 10-11 Judas comes to them in secret, and between these things, Mark places a story of an unnamed woman's publicly extravagant act of love and devotion to Jesus. In doing this, he is emphasizing the importance of her act by contrasting her with the scribes and Judas. Her selfless passion stands in contrast to their selfish pursuits. We will find out they are not the only ones she is contrasted with. Look now at verse 9. At the end of this story, Jesus says to His disciples, "And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."

Jesus uses that all important phrase “truly, I say to you,” and shares with the disciples her act would always be told wherever the gospel is proclaimed. All this screams, “pay close attention to this story.” So, I want to ask, why is this story one to be told wherever the gospel is proclaimed? I believe we can draw out two reasons from the story itself. First,

It is a Story about Treasuring Christ

Church, the goal of the gospel is not simply to save you from the penalty of your sin. That is part of what takes place, but the purpose of God’s grace in salvation is far more than the relief of not experiencing the torments of hell and His eternal wrath. The purpose of redemption is to restore His rightful place in our hearts as the greatest treasure and joy imaginable. One reason this story will always be told with gospel proclamation is because it points our hearts to someone who understood the treasure Christ is. Look at the scene in verse 3, “And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head.” Mark’s focus is squarely on this woman and Jesus Christ as he opens by only speak of them and the house they were in. The description of the house points to the beauty of Jesus as it is “the house of Simon the leper.” The fact that they are in his house shows the glory of Christ, as leprosy left people outcast from society, and it suggest Simon had likely been restored through the healing touch of Jesus. Mention of Simon by name also means he would have been known by the readers as someone still connected to the community of faith. Now, picture the scene with me. Jesus is reclining at table when a woman, interestingly unnamed by Mark, comes in and breaks a flask of ointment to pour over his head. From the moment she comes into the room all eyes would have been on here and the sound of the flask breaking makes this as public of a display as one could make. Pay attention to how Mark goes out of his way to describe the flask and what was in it. He tells us it was in an alabaster jar which Pliny the Elder from the first century says held only the best ointments (Natural History XII. iii. 19). He then describes the ointment as “pure nard, very costly.” Nard was a perfume that came from a rare plant only found in India, which made it expensive to acquire. This detail of breaking the flask and pouring it over Jesus’ head may be intended to highlight this as a careless way of getting the perfume out. If that is the case, Mark is showing the woman’s complete lack of concern for the nard and strong desire to use it for this purpose. Notice what happens next in verses 4-5, “There were some who said to themselves indignantly, ‘Why was the ointment wasted like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor.’ And they scolded her.” Mark says some privately spoke to themselves indignantly, using the same word for the anger of disciples’ anger when James and John asked to sit at the right and left of Jesus in glory in chapter 10. In this private conversation, they declared this to be a wasteful act, place value on the ointment, and suggest a better use. The value of three hundred denarii is equal to a year’s earnings and because women weren’t typically placed in careers that would earn wages like these, it likely means this was a family heirloom which would increase its value. As we consider these things and her making the flask unusable by breaking it, we are being shown her estimation of the value of Jesus. She publicly declares the immeasurable value she placed on Jesus with this seemingly wasteful and costly gift. This value judgment is compared to those around her as they consider it wasted, suggest giving it to the poor would be a better use, and go as far as scolding her for using it in this way. Without realizing it, they are essentially saying Jesus can’t be worth this much. Family, this may have included the apostles and even Peter, James, and John who saw Jesus transfigured on the mountain. As we see this scene unfold, it points out how we too can be satisfied with proximity to Christ alone but fail to truly consider Him to be our greatest treasure. Like those in this house, our concern for good things can be misplaced. We must never forget the commandment to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, minds, soul and strength is first above loving our neighbor. As Colossians 1:17-18 says, “[Christ] is before all things... And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.”

If things like providing for the poor come first in our hearts, as worthy of a cause as those are, Christ is not preeminent in everything, and we are missing the goal of the gospel. Look at Jesus' response in verses 6-7, "But Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me.'" Jesus commands them to stop and compares their estimation with His. They think it is wasteful, He sees it as beautiful. He speaks of this woman similar to how He spoke of the widow at the end of chapter 12, setting her as an example to follow. He is saying follow her example, don't scold her for it. He then shows the reason is not that concern for the poor isn't valuable, but that He will not always be with them. Church, do you ever stop to ponder that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was physically with people? If you truly have seen the glory of Jesus with your mind's eye, you have to wonder what this would have been like. They walked and talked with our God and only had Him with them for a little while longer. One day, all who trust in Jesus will experience His presence for all of eternity and this woman shows what it looks like to understand the incomparable worth of being with Jesus. This story should be told whenever the gospel is proclaimed because it is a story about treasuring Christ. It shows us the purpose of the gospel is to adjust the value judgments in our hearts and lead us to treasure Christ above all else. The second thing we see that shows the reason this story's important is,

It is a Story about Trusting Christ

We don't know if the woman understood what she was doing in the moment, but we do know all who hear this story now understand what she was doing. Look at verse 8, "She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial." The contrast of what this woman did with what the disciples had done is striking to me. Three times, the disciples were told of Jesus' pending sacrifice on the cross and each time they made things about them, seemingly not trusting that what he was saying was true. They had done nothing to prepare for His death, some like Peter even denying it was necessary, but this woman understands and prepares for His burial. As James Edwards comments, "What exactly has she done to be worthy of such commemoration? She has of course expended a lavish gift on Jesus, but she also appears to be the first person to perceive that the gospel is realized only in suffering" (James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, 416). Verse 9 is the last time the term "gospel" is used in this letter and all other uses are connected to suffering. Jesus once again focuses the disciples' mind on the necessity of His death and shares the meaning of her lavish gift is connected to that. This is a story about trusting that death is what Christ needed to do in order to secure our pardon. It is to show us how His death is worthy of adoring with all kinds of sacrifice in our lives. Family, let that phrase ring in your ears "she did what she could." This woman, we are told, did what she could to honor and adore our Lord and Savior. The story and statement invite two questions for us to consider in response to this passage. First,

1) What Measure is Your Devotion to Jesus?

We don't know how many people were in this house, or how many were secretly scolding here. What we do know is she is the only one commended by Jesus for understanding of the value of being with Him. Do you see Jesus as worthy of this kind of extravagant love? Sadly, many in the church throughout history are satisfied with nothing more than a moderate devotion to Christ. We give to the work of the kingdom when it benefits us with tax breaks or we get something in return. We need to hold fundraisers that give gifts in return to get people to give to the work of spreading the gospel. Less than 2% of giving goes to the work reaching unreached peoples with the gospel. We attend worship or serve when it's convenient, skipping anytime something else comes up that sounds better to do. My heart breaks over these things, not because they affect me or church attendance, but because they tell the world how much we value our Savior and His kingdom. Jesus said in Matthew 13:44-46, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it." Family, is this the value you have placed on the kingdom of God?

Would you give up everything to gain Christ? The truth is that is how much He is worth. What measure is your devotion to Christ? Second,

2) How Can You Give More in Service to Christ?

The truth is all of us can give more, including myself. We can sacrifice more. We can share the gospel with more people. We can go deeper in worship. We can trust more in His goodness. And as we learn to value our Savior like this woman did, we will give more. Family, everything we do should be filtered through this value judgment. We live and sacrifice here and now because we know the presence of Christ awaits us for all of eternity. We serve and love others because we know this delights Him and He satisfies our hearts. I am convinced the greatest motivation to give more in service is to see and know that Christ is the greatest treasure imaginable, trusting it is better to store up treasure in heaven than here on earth. No other motivation should be needed. This is what motivated the apostle Paul who says in Philippians 1:21, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” He understood the surpassing value of Jesus Christ, so he says in Philippians 3:7-14, “whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” Then Paul makes sure we understand this is how we should live, saying in Philippians 3:15, “Let those of us who are mature think this way.” Family, I don’t share these things to leave you with guilt over where you are in your faith but to hold out to you the treasure that Christ is, because I continue to learn just how valuable it truly is. I, like Paul, have not obtained this but I long to keep growing in this desire, so I press on toward the goal.

Conclusion:

As the worship team is coming to lead us in a time of reflection and response, I encourage you to consider your response to these two questions. If you haven’t trusted in Christ’s death for you, look at this story and see the treasure Jesus Christ is. Know that He died on the cross to pay for your sin and pray for His forgiveness. As you do, He welcomes you into His loving arms and provides you with peace and joy like you have never known. If you are trusting Christ, look at the story and seek to value Jesus like this woman. Ask for more of His presence in your life and go deeper in your devotion to Him. As always, we invite you to come and kneel before Him or receive prayer from a member of our prayer team. You can sit and reflect as long as you need and stand and sing when you are ready. Let’s press into God’s grace together. Would you pray with me?